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E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PGOV, EFIN, ECON, ELAB, AR

SUBJECT: LOCAL POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS IN ARGENTINA, 24-28

SEPTEMBER

- REF: A. BUENOS AIRES 3462
 - B. BUENOS AIRES 3285
 - C. BUENOS AIRES 3233
- 1. (U) SUMMARY: WELL BEHIND CONTINUING AND OVERWHELMING PUBLIC ATTENTION TO THE LOCAL AND INTERNATIONAL TERRORIST THREAT, THE OCTOBER 14 LEGISLATIVE ELECTIONS ARE GAINING SOME LIMITED LOCAL POLITICAL FOCUS. THE POSSIBILITY THAT FORMER PRESIDENT ALFONSIN COULD BE DEFEATED IN HIS SENATE RACE, AND SPECULATION OVER AN UNPRECEDENTED LEVEL OF VOTER ABSTENTION AND DESTROYED BALLOTS ARE TWO OF THE KEY ISSUES GAINING THE GREATEST ATTENTION. SOCIAL TENSION IS ON THE RISE IN SOME PROVINCES, MOTIVATED IN PART BY CONTINUING DELAYS IN FEDERAL TRANSFERS OF FUNDS. IN THE PROVINCE OF ENTRE RIOS, STATE WORKERS HAVE NOT BEEN PAID SINCE JULY AND HAVE ORGANIZED PROTESTS THAT HAVE RAISED FEARS OF A FEDERAL INTERVENTION.

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MEANWHILE, THE TWO COMPETING FACTIONS OF THE COUNTRY'S LABOR
CONFEDERATION ARE ATTEMPTING TO RECONCILE THEIR DIFFERENCES
IN ADVANCE OF THE LEGISLATIVE ELECTIONS. THE AMIA TRIAL
BEGAN ON SEPTEMBER 24 AMID STRONG SECURITY AND PRESS
INTEREST. END SUMMARY.

PUBLIC APATHY APPARENT IN LEGISLATIVE CAMPAIGN

2. (SBU) HEIGHTENED CONCERNS OVER TERRORISM AND THE INTERNATIONAL SITUATION, COUPLED WITH CONTINUED DISCONTENT OVER THE PROLONGED RECESSION, HAVE PRODUCED A LACKLUSTER LEGISLATIVE CAMPAIGN WITH LITTLE PUBLIC INTEREST (SEE REFTEL A). ONLY DURING THE PAST WEEK HAVE BILLBOARDS AND POSTERS FOR CANDIDATES BECOME NOTICEABLE IN THE CITY, AND WHAT LITTLE POLITICAL COVERAGE THERE IS IN THE LOCAL NEWSPAPERS REMAINS RELEGATED TO THE BACK PAGES. A LOCAL EQUIS STUDY PREDICTS THAT 25 PERCENT OF ELIGIBLE VOTERS -- MORE THAN 6 MILLION PEOPLE -- WILL CAST BLANK BALLOTS, NULLIFY THEIR VOTE, OR ABSTAIN ALTOGETHER IN A COUNTRY WHERE VOTING REMAINS OBLIGATORY. SOME LOCAL ELECTION EXPERTS PREDICT AN EVEN HIGHER FIGURE, CLOSER TO THE ALMOST 40 PERCENT "PROTEST" PHENOMENON OF BLANK AND SPOILED BALLOTS THAT WAS WITNESSED DURING THE RECENT REFERENDUM ON POLITICAL REFORM IN CORDOBA PROVINCE (SEE REFTEL B). AN EMBASSY CONTACT NOTED THAT THIS PHENOMENON WILL DO MORE DAMAGE TO LESS PROMINENT CANDIDATES, WHO ARE COMPETING FOR THE PROTEST VOTE. THE CAMPAIGN POSTERS OF ONE OF THESE, GUSTAVO BELIZ IN THE FEDERAL CAPITAL, DEPICTS MANUEL BELGRANO, WHO DESIGNED THE ARGENTINE FLAG,

WITH THE CAPTION, "HE DIDN'T CAST A BLANK BALLOT. HE CREATED UNCLASSIFIED

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THE FLAG." OTHER MINOR CANDIDATES IN THE CAPITAL ARE LESS SUBTLE IN TRYING TO GRAB THE PROTEST VOTE: THE POSTERS OF VILMA RIPOLL (UNITED LEFT CANDIDATE FOR SENATOR) CALL ON ARGENTINES TO "ADJUST THE RICH AND THE IMF," A REFERENCE TO THE BUDGET CUTS AND ECONOMIC ADJUSTMENT UNDERWAY; THOSE OF PATRICIA WALSH (UNITED LEFT CANDIDATE FOR DEPUTY) SCREAM, "DON'T PAY THE FOREIGN DEBT;" AND THOSE OF CHRISTIAN CASTILLO (PARTY OF SOCIALIST WORKERS CANDIDATE FOR SENATE) DECLARE, "ENOUGH OF ARGENTINE CAPITALISM." THE LATTER THREE CANDIDATES ARE ALL WELL DOWN IN THE POLLS WITH LITTLE CHANCE OF WINNING OFFICE, BUT THEY CLEARLY SEE POINTS TO BE MADE BY ATTACKING THE GOVERNMENT'S ECONOMIC PROGRAM.

DUHALDE A CERTAIN WINNER, BUT ALFONSIN MORE QUESTIONABLE

3. (SBU) TWO OF ARGENTINA'S MOST PROMINENT "FAILED" POLITICIANS ARE TRYING TO USE THE SENATORIAL ELECTIONS TO PROPEL THEMSELVES BACK INTO THE POLITICAL LIMELIGHT. PERONIST EDUARDO DUHALDE, WHO LOST THE 1999 PRESIDENTIAL

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SEPTEMBER

ELECTION TO DE LA RUA, HAS A DOUBLE-DIGIT LEAD IN THE SENATE RACE IN BUENOS AIRES PROVINCE OVER HIS NEAREST COMPETITORS, VIRTUALLY ASSURING HIM AND HIS RUNNING MATE TWO OF THE THREE PROVINCIAL SEATS UP FOR GRABS IN THE 72-MEMBER SENATE. POLLS SHOW THAT THE RACE FOR THE REMAINING THIRD SEAT IS MUCH LESS CERTAIN. FORMER PRESIDENT AND PRESIDENT OF THE RADICAL PARTY (UCR) RAUL ALFONSIN IS IN A TIGHT RACE FOR SECOND PLACE BEHIND DUHALDE RUNNING AGAINST LEFTIST PRIEST LUIS FARINELLO. RIGHTIST CANDIDATE AND FORMER PROVINCIAL POLICE CHIEF LUIS PATTI, AND THE CANDIDATE OF ELISA CARRIO'S LEFTIST ARI PARTY, JORGE BARRACHIA. A LOCAL ELECTION EXPERT HAS POINTED OUT THAT THE POLLS SHOWING A TIGHT RACE FOR THE THIRD SEAT REFLECT INTERVIEWS CONDUCTED ONLY IN THE GREATER BUENOS AIRES AREA, WHERE SUPPORT FOR FARINELLO AND BARRACHIA PROBABLY WOULD BE HIGHEST, WHILE IGNORING THE INTERIOR OF THE PROVINCE, WHERE SUPPORT FOR ALFONSIN HAS HISTORICALLY BEEN UNCLASSIFIED

PAGE 03 BUENOS 03617 02 OF 04 291434Z HIGHER. BASED ON THIS, HE PREDICTED THAT ALFONSIN WOULD ULTIMATELY PREVAIL, BUT A WELL-CONNECTED PJ MEMBER AND ADVISOR TO SEVERAL PROMINENT POLITICIANS WAS NOT AS CONVINCED

AND BELIEVES THAT THE RACE FOR THE THIRD SEAT WILL GO DOWN TO THE WIRE AND BE DECIDED THE WEEKEND BEFORE THE ELECTION.

4. (SBU) NEITHER ALFONSIN NOR THE RULING ALIANZA'S SENATE CANDIDATE IN THE FEDERAL CAPITAL, RODOLFO TERRAGNO, HAVE BEEN PARTICULARLY WARM TO THE GOVERNMENT'S ECONOMIC POLICIES, BUT AN ALFONSIN LOSS IN THE PROVINCE COUPLED WITH A SECOND-PLACE FINISH BY TERRAGNO IN THE CAPITAL WOULD SIGNAL A HUMILIATING SYMBOLIC DEFEAT FOR THE RULING ALLIANCE. THE PRESIDENT, FOR EXAMPLE, ALREADY HAS MADE IT CLEAR THAT HE WILL VOTE FOR TERRAGNO DESPITE THE OPEN CONFLICT BETWEEN THE TWO IN RECENT MONTHS OVER DE LA RUA'S ECONOMIC PROGRAM. TERRAGNO IS LOCKED IN A TIGHT CONTEST WITH SOCIALIST ALFREDO BRAVO, THE LEFTIST, COMBATIVE CO-LEADER OF ELISA CARRIO'S MOVEMENT, ARI. THE OUTCOME OF THAT RACE WILL DETERMINE WHETHER THE ALIANZA OR THE ARI WILL BE ABLE TO SEAT TWO SENATORS FROM THE CAPITAL.

SOCIAL DISTURBANCES IN ENTRE RIOS PROVINCE

5. (U) IN ENTRE RIOS PROVINCE, WHICH BORDERS BUENOS AIRES PROVINCE TO THE NORTH, SOCIAL TENSIONS ARE ON THE RISE AFTER THE GOVERNOR THERE CLOSED SCHOOLS, ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICES, AND ALL BUT EMERGENCY SERVICES FOR THREE DAYS THIS WEEK BECAUSE OF FINANCIAL DIFFICULTIES. SOME 3,000 WORKERS DEMONSTRATED IN FRONT OF THE HOUSE OF GOVERNMENT IN THE CAPITAL, PARANA, TO PROTEST THE GOVERNMENT'S INABILITY TO PAY UNCLASSIFIED

PAGE 04 BUENOS 03617 02 0F 04 291434Z AUGUST SALARIES AND TO REJECT THE GOVERNOR'S PROPOSAL TO PAY THEM WITH BONDS. THE ENTRE RIOS GOVERNOR IS BLAMING THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT'S FAILURE TO TRANSFER PROMISED CO-PARTICIPATION FUNDS OWED THE PROVINCE FOR HIS INABILITY TO COVER EXPENSES. OTHER GOVERNORS HAVE ALSO BEEN MAKING THE SAME CLAIMS IN RECENT WEEKS, INCLUDING CHACO GOVERNOR ROZAS. IN THE ENTRE RIOS PROVINCIAL CAPITAL, MOTHERS WITH CHILDREN BLOCKED ENTRANCES TO GROCERY STORES AND THE LOCAL WAL MART, BEGGING FOR FOOD FROM THOSE ENTERING. LOCAL OBSERVERS ARE OPENLY TALKING OF THE POSSIBILITY OF THE SACKING OF SUPERMARKETS BY UNEMPLOYED AND OTHER PROTESTING WORKERS. SOCIAL AND FINANCIAL PROBLEMS IN ENTRE RIOS HAVE PROMPTED RUMORS OF AN IMMINENT FEDERAL INTERVENTION SIMILAR TO THAT IMPLEMENTED IN CORRIENTES SHORTLY AFTER DE LA RUA TOOK OFFICE IN DECEMBER 1999, BUT THESE RUMORS HAVE BEEN DISMISSED BY INTERIOR MINISTER MESTRE. THE LEAD EDITORIAL IN DAILY-OF-RECORD LA NACION ON 27 SEPTEMBER STRONGLY CRITICIZED THE PRESENCE OF CLIENTELISM INHERENT IN THE BLOATED PROVINCIAL BUREAUCRACIES, BLAMING THESE "UNPRODUCTIVE

PARASITIC NICHES" FOR THE FISCAL DISEQUILIBRIUM, INCREASING PUBLIC DEBT, AND HIGH INTEREST RATES, ALL OF WHICH IT CLAIMED

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SEPTEMBER

HINDER PRIVATE INVESTMENT AND THE CREATION OF PRIVATE SECTOR JOBS IN THE PROVINCES.

CLOSING RANKS WITHIN ORGANIZED LABOR

6. (SBU) EVER SINCE THE AUGUST 29 JOINT DEMONSTRATION BY THE TWO SQUABBLING FACTIONS OF THE CGT, THE COUNTRY'S LARGEST LABOR CONFEDERATION (SEE REFTEL C), THERE HAS BEEN STRONG SPECULATION THAT THE "OFFICIAL" CGT, HEADED BY RODOLFO DAER, AND THE DISSIDENT CGT, LED BY HUGO MOYANO, WOULD REUNITE. AT THAT TIME, EMBASSY CONTACTS IN THE DISSIDENT CGT WERE SKEPTICAL THAT THE REUNIFICATION WOULD BE POSSIBLE, ALTHOUGH THEY BELIEVED THE TWO BRANCHES OF THE FEDERATION COULD WORK TOGETHER ON SPECIFIC ACTIVITIES. THIS PAST WEEK, AT A UNCLASSIFIED

PAGE 03 BUENOS 03617 03 OF 04 291435Z MEMORIAL SERVICE FOR CGT LEADER JOSE IGNACIO RUCCI ASSASSINATED 28 YEARS AGO, MOYANO AND DAER SAID THAT THE CGT IS ESSENTIALLY UNITED AND THAT ALL THAT REMAINS IS TO SET A DATE FOR THE OFFICIAL REUNIFICATION. FORMER CGT HEAD LORENZO MIGUEL SAID, "IT IS TIME FOR A SINGLE CGT AND TO TAKE UP THE SPACES THAT BELONG TO LABOR IN POLITICAL LIFE BECAUSE THOSE WHO GOVERN US HAVE LEFT US TO ONE SIDE AND WE HAVE TO GET BACK TO BEING PLAYERS." ACCORDING TO THE PRESS, THE TWO BRANCHES OF THE CGT HAVE DECIDED ON A PLAN OF ACTION TO BE IMPLEMENTED AFTER THE OCTOBER 14 LEGISLATIVE ELECTIONS. THE PLAN INCLUDES ROADBLOCKS, OCCUPATION OF PUBLIC BUILDINGS AND EVEN A POSSIBLE 72 HOUR GENERAL STRIKE. THUS FAR, THE PROCESS HAS NOT ADVANCED TO THE POINT OF NAMING A LEADER FOR THE NEW UNITED CGT. DAER AND HIS BRANCH SAY THAT WILL TAKE MORE TIME, AND MOYANO'S DISSIDENT CGT ALSO IS CAUTIOUS. THE LATTER STILL HAS NOT FORGIVEN THE OFFICIAL BRANCH FOR ITS SUPPORT OF LABOR REFORM MEASURES PUSHED THROUGH CONGRESS BY DE LA RUA EARLY IN HIS TERM AND THE OFFICIAL BRANCH'S FAILURE TO SHOW UP FOR A MARCH 2000 LABOR CONGRESS.

7. (SBU) COMMENT: WHETHER FULL UNIFICATION IS COMING OR NOT, HINTING THAT IT MIGHT WILL GIVE ORGANIZED LABOR MORE CREDIBILITY AND POLITICAL WEIGHT AS IT PUSHES ITS AGENDA BEFORE THE GOVERNMENT AND THE NEW CONGRESS. SUPPORTERS OF THE TWO CGT HEADS, HOWEVER, ARE RELUCTANT TO UNITE UNDER THE LEADERSHIP OF THE OTHER, AND GIVEN THE LONG HISTORY OF

FRAGMENTATION WITHIN THE ARGENTINE LABOR MOVEMENT, THIS DEFACTO REUNIFICATION MAY SUFFICE FOR NOW TO SERVE THEIR POLITICAL PURPOSES.

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PAGE 04 BUENOS 03617 03 OF 04 291435Z 1994 TERRORISM TRIAL GETS UNDERWAY

8. (U) THE PUBLIC TRIAL OF 20 SUSPECTS ACCUSED OF COMPLICITY IN THE 1994 BOMBING OF THE JEWISH COMMUNITY CENTER, AMIA, BEGAN ON SEPTEMBER 24 AMID STRONG SECURITY MEASURES IN A COURTROOM DESIGNED ESPECIALLY FOR THE PROCEEDINGS. FOREIGN REPRESENTATIVES INCLUDED MEMBERS OF THE U.S. JEWISH COMMUNITY, THE HEAD OF THE INTER-AMERICAN HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION, DR. CLAUDIO GROSSMAN, AND EMBASSY REPRESENTATIVES INCLUDING FROM THE U.S. EMBASSY. SUSPECTS -- 15 OF WHOM ARE FORMER POLICEMEN -- ARE NOT CHARGED WITH HAVING MASTERMINDED THE TERRORIST BOMBING ITSELF BUT RATHER WITH SUPPLYING THE VAN ALLEGEDLY USED IN THE ATTACK AND COMMITTING OTHER CRIMES UNCOVERED DURING THE INVESTIGATION. FIVE OF THE SUSPECTS, INCLUDING A FORMER POLICE CAPTAIN AND THREE OTHER FORMER POLICE, ARE CONSIDERED "NECESSARY PARTICIPANTS" AND, IF CONVICTED, COULD FACE LIFE IN PRISON. ALTHOUGH THE INVESTIGATION HAS SUFFERED MISSTEPS, THE TRIAL IS WIDELY CONSIDERED TO BE THE MOST SIGNIFICANT IN ARGENTINA SINCE THE TRIALS OF FORMER MILITARY LEADERS FOR

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SEPTEMBER

CRIMES COMMITTED DURING THE "DIRTY WAR." MANY HOPE THAT THIS ORAL PHASE OF THE TRIAL, WHICH IS EXPECTED TO EXTEND OVER THE BETTER PART OF A YEAR, WILL GENERATE NEW LEADS AND PROGRESS IN THE CONTINUING INVESTIGATION INTO THE AMIA BOMBING. THE RACE HAS ATTRACTED GREAT LOCAL PRESS PUBLICITY, PARTICULARLY IN LIGHT OF THE RECENT TERRORIST ATTACKS ON THE UNITED STATES.

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